

Field Report

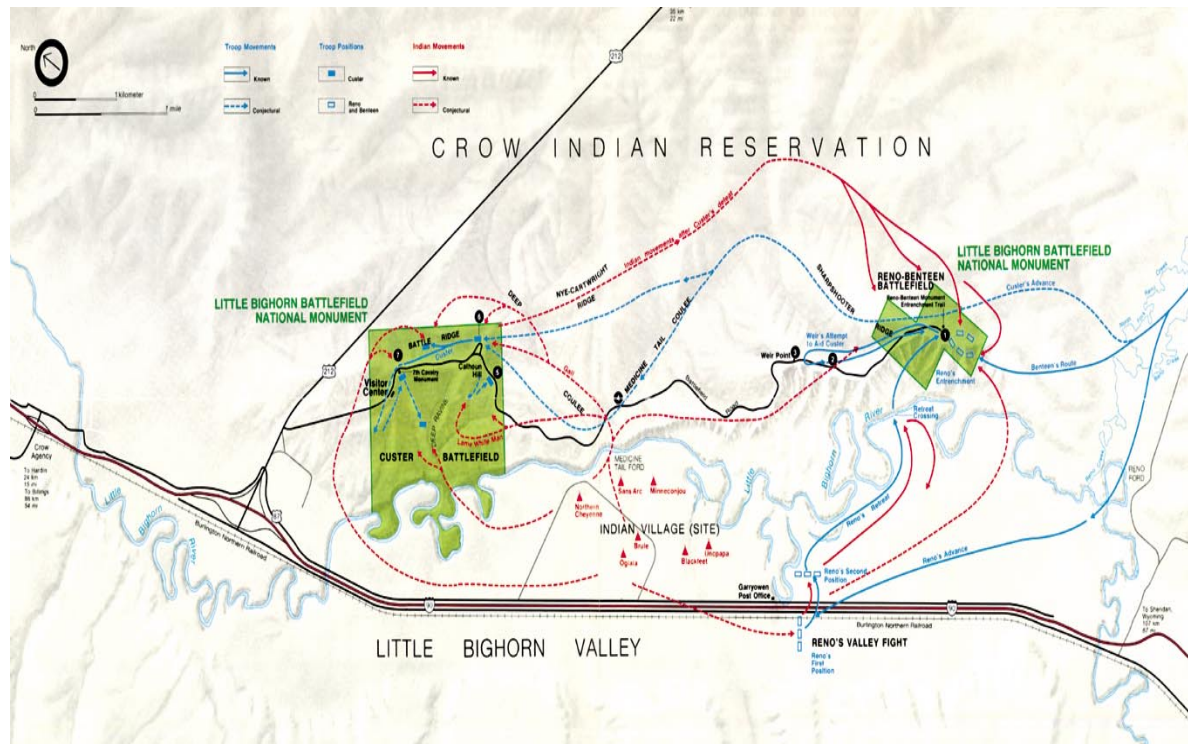
Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument

■ 1.0 Summary

The mission and goals of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument are to preserve, protect, and interpret for the enjoyment of future generations the historic, cultural, and natural resources, including lands and artifacts, pertaining to the Battle of Little Bighorn.

Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, located in southeastern Montana, appears to be a strong candidate for the introduction of alternative modes of transportation. It has high levels of summer visitation, a single constrained ingress and egress point, a narrow roadway for travel between the visitor center, Custer Battlefield, and the Reno-Benteen Battlefield, and inadequate parking at the visitor center and the interpretive waysides. A detailed study was prepared in October 1998 to document the existing conditions of the Park and the need for transportation improvements. Traffic safety management recommendations and alternative transportation systems (ATS) were considered. The range of ATS solutions considered included remote parking with a visitor center shuttle, tour road shuttle, and a town-to-park shuttle:

- **Remote Parking with Visitor Transportation System** – This alternative would close the Park to private vehicles during the summer months and provide access to the Park via a shuttle system from a remote parking location. Visitors would park their vehicles in a new lot constructed outside the Park boundary below the entry gate and ride a transit shuttle to the visitor center.
- **Visitor Center Relocation to Garryowen with a Shuttle Tour System** – The NPS is currently exploring the possibility of relocating the visitor center by jointly acquiring an existing building at Garryowen with the Crow Agency. This alternative would allow visitors to experience the Park visitor center and a Crow cultural center in one location before touring the monument itself. Visitors would be shuttled from the visitor center through the Park on a guided tour and return via a loop to the visitor center.
- **Shuttle Service from the Town of Hardin** – Representatives from the Town of Hardin have expressed interest in participating in a transportation system that would run between the town and the monument. The shuttle system would be privately owned and operated, possibly by the Crow Agency or Little Bighorn College, and provide limited service from the campgrounds, hotels, and the museum to the Park, focusing on visitors with RVs. The system would likely terminate at the visitor center or a future remote parking area to allow passengers to transfer to the Park's transit system.

Figure 1. Park Layout

■ 2.0 Background Information

2.1 Location

Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument is located in southeastern Montana, approximately 54 miles southeast of Billings, Montana and 67 miles northwest of Sheridan, Wyoming. The Park is located in a rural area next to the Crow Agency within the Crow Indian Reservation along the Little Bighorn River. The nearest town is Hardin with a population of approximately 3,000 people.

2.2 Administration and Classification

The battlefield was officially recognized and designated as a national cemetery in 1879. On December 7, 1886, by Executive Order, a boundary was established approximately one mile square for the National Cemetery of Custer's Battlefield Reservation. The Reno-Bentley Battlefield was acquired on April 14, 1926 and placed under the charge of the United States Army. On July 3, 1940 under Executive Order No. 8428, management of the area was transferred from the Army to the NPS, Department of the Interior, effective July 1, 1940. The Custer Battlefield National Cemetery was redesignated as Custer Battlefield National Monument on March 22, 1946. On May 1, 1987, Last Stand Hill Site, Reno-

Benteen Site, and Custer Battlefield National Cemetery were listed on the National Registry of Historic Places. The Act of January 3, 1991 (H.R. 848) redesignated the Custer Battlefield National Monument as Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.

2.3 Physical Description

The Park consists of approximately 756 acres located in two parcels separated by about four miles. The northern parcel is the Custer Battlefield proper and the southern parcel is the Reno-Benteen Battlefield. The two parcels are separated by a combination of non-Indian lands, Indian-allotted lands, and Crow tribal lands.

The developed areas within the Park consist of the Visitor Center and the National Cemetery, located in the northern parcel, and the tour road, which connects the two parcels. The Park entrance is located at the northwest boundary of the Custer Battlefield, Park Headquarters is located within the Visitor Center, and Park maintenance and staff residences are located in the same general area.

2.4 Mission and Goals of the National Monument

The mission and goals of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument are to preserve, protect, and interpret for the enjoyment of future generations the historic, cultural, and natural resources, including lands and artifacts, pertaining to the Battle of Little Bighorn. The monument provides visitors with an understanding of the historic events leading up to the encounter between 12 companies of the United States Seventh Cavalry Regiment commanded by Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes, and the consequences suffered by both the military and the American Indian contingents.

A Long View of the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument



2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

Annual visitation data have been collected dating back to 1940 when approximately 60,500 people visited the Park. The highest annual visitation to the Park occurred in 1993, when over 446,000 visitors were recorded. In 1998, just over 370,000 visitors experienced Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, with about 90 percent of visitation occurring between mid-May and October. Visitor data available for 1999 shows 230,629 visitors through the month of July, approximately the same number of visitors in seven months that the Park was experiencing for an entire year just 10 years ago.

Fifty percent of the visitors to the Park, year-to-date in 1999, were adults between the ages of 18 and 61. Twenty percent were seniors, 20 percent teenagers, and 10 percent were children 12 years and under. Over 50 percent of the visits were made by family groups. The Park draws visitors nationally with the majority of visitors (83 percent) from outside the region with an average length of stay of approximately 1.5 hours. Park visitation typically shows a marked increase three times a year: on June 25 and 26, the anniversary of the battle; the first week in August with the annual motorcycle rally held in Sturgis, South Dakota; and the third weekend of August with the Crow Fair.

The number of vehicles entering the Park increases rapidly in the morning hours, beginning at 7:00 a.m. and reaching a peak between 11:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m., before gradually tapering off over the afternoon and evening hours. The number of exiting vehicles follows a similar pattern, with a peak in visitor accumulation occurring between 11:00 a.m. and 12:00 p.m. The majority of vehicles entering the Park (67 percent) are passenger cars, trucks, or vans, while 31 percent are classified as oversized vehicles, including cars or trucks with trailers, RVs, RVs with trailers, and other large trucks. Motorcycles account for only two percent of the vehicles entering the Park.

■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Transportation conditions, issues and concerns for Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument are well documented. The Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument Traffic Safety Study, prepared October 1998 for the NPS, identified the following site-specific problems:

- There are two access lanes at the Park entrance, one on either side of the entrance station, and one exit lane. The pavement striping is confusing and it is possible for exiting vehicles to mistake the access lane for an exit lane.
- Traffic, regulatory, and warning signing within the Park is often mounted too low. Signs or pavement markings in the visitor center parking area do not indicate the desired traffic circulation pattern. Although two-way traffic is allowed, a portion of

the parking area appears to function as a one-way, thus creating confusion in the parking area.

- In general, parking demand near the visitor center is at or near capacity during peak hours of a typical summer visitation day. Specifically, limited parking for oversized vehicles has people double-parking alongside properly parked oversized vehicles in the RV parking areas. Rangers discourage this practice when they are in the area.
- When the RV parking area is full, drivers often attempt to find parking for their oversized vehicles in the Stonehouse parking area. This parking lot is not designed for the large areas needed for oversize vehicles to turn around and though RV drivers get their vehicles into the parking area, they are unable to navigate out. When this occurs, visitors are forced to unhitch trailers and turn them around manually or, sometimes, Park employees may help them turn the vehicles around.
- The tour road is very narrow (approximately 18 feet) without shoulders to allow vehicles to pull off the pavement. In addition, there are drop-offs from the pavement in many places and no center line pavement markings. The tour road is signed with an eight-ton weight limit intended to keep oversized vehicles off the tour road. But because many visitors do not know the weights of their vehicles, they often drive oversized vehicles and RVs on the tour road, creating safety problems for oncoming and passing vehicles.
- Many of the seven waysides do not have sufficient space to pull over and park; most provide parking for only one or two vehicles. Although visitors are encouraged to pull over only at waysides on the right hand side of the road, in many instances visitors cross the tour road to view the sites. This creates a significant safety concern, particularly in areas with limited visibility due to vertical and horizontal curves in the road.

The Weight Limit on the Narrow Tour Road Is Eight Tons



In general, the issues and concerns identified in the October 1998 Traffic Safety Study are consistent with field observations. Currently, the Park provides one-hour guided bus tours of the battlefield which leave the visitor center five times daily. The Park uses a 23-passenger van for the tour and charges \$10 per person. The tour operation is provided through a concession contract with Little Bighorn College.

3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The Town of Hardin (population 3,000), located approximately 15 miles north of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, is considered the Park's gateway community. Hardin, primarily an agricultural community, is the Bighorn County seat. The NPS has an excellent relationship with the town and is very involved in the community. The NPS staff is represented on the board of directors for the chamber of commerce, and also host open houses for the community and sponsor moonlight tours of the Park.

Hardin derives some economic benefit from tourism to the Park. Little Bighorn History Museum, located in Hardin, also serves as the state visitor center. The museum captures approximately 30,000 visitors annually, but less than 10 percent of the Park's annual visitation. Hardin has seen some degree of economic development in recent years, primarily hotel and fast food development along the interstate. The town currently has five hotels, two bed-and-breakfast inns, and three campgrounds.

There is no form of alternative transportation within Hardin or between Hardin and the Park. Visitors who stay in the town or at the campgrounds, or who visit the Little Bighorn History Museum with oversized vehicles, are encouraged to leave trailers and RVs in town while visiting the Park to reduce traffic impacts. Representatives from the town believe a limited shuttle service focusing on RVs at the campgrounds, a few hotels, and the museum may work if implemented.

3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The Park commemorates one of America's most famous battles, the Battle of Little Bighorn, fought on June 25 and 26, 1876. The battle marks the height of a 400-year struggle between Euro-Americans and Native Americans, two culturally divergent peoples. This nationally significant battle was the most glorified one on the Great Plains as reflected in film, theater, and art. The battle has become an American cultural icon. Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument allows for reflection on the historic events which took place here over 120 years ago and their impacts on this country and its consciousness.

The Park's primary resources are the cemetery, the battlefield, the archeological remains, and the museum and archival collection. The National Cemetery encompasses a 6.21-acre portion of the monument and contains the graves of nearly 5,000 veterans and dependents from the Battle of Little Bighorn through the Vietnam War. The Custer and the Reno-Benteen Battlefields retain an extremely high degree of visual integrity to their original appearances in 1876. Therefore, the monument's challenge is to maintain and manage resources in order to preserve the natural landscape and historic scene of the battlefields.

The National Cemetery at Little Bighorn



In addition, the Park's museum collection is estimated to include over 119,000 relics, including personal items belonging to Custer, Native American items, U.S. Cavalry items, documents, rare books, interpretive photographs, and works of art.

Current threats identified in the 1999 Resources Management Plan include:

- Safety concerns regarding the Park tour road and possible resource damage due to vehicles pulling off the road where there is no shoulder.
- Encroachment on the cultural landscape is a major concern. Two private museums have been constructed recently at Garryowen, the site of the opening attack of the battle, and another private landowner installed a well and parking lot adjacent to the Reno-Benteen Battlefield along the 4.1-mile tour road, which connects the two battlefields through private and allotted lands.
- Parking problems and visitor center relocation are also of concern. The current facilities do not meet present-day parking demands and further expansion of the parking areas is not an option due to encroachment onto historic resources. Additionally, the anticipated Indian Memorial will further impact already constrained parking. The General Management Plan calls for relocation of the visitor center to Garryowen.

3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The most common visitor activities at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument include hiking the interpretive trails, listening to interpretive lectures, viewing and photographing scenery, and experiencing the visitor center. Although the Park encourages visitors to hike the marked and paved trails within the monument, several side trails have developed from people hiking off-trail at small pull-off areas along the road where no maintained trails exist. These "social trails" appear rapidly and begin to attract other

visitors to walk on them. The Park is planning to open two new trail sites and expects that illegal use of “social trails” will decrease with the opening of the new facilities.

Implementation of an ATS may improve the recreational opportunities within the Park by better directing visitors to the site’s features and educating them on the impacts of hiking off-trail.

3.5 Tribal Considerations

The Battle of Little Bighorn has generated multiple viewpoints regarding its significance. The defeat of the Seventh Cavalry by the American Indians became an incentive for the U.S. Military to end American Indian resistance to immigrant settlement throughout the west. For American Indians, the battle was seen as a major victory for the preservation of their way of life. The battle remains to this day a significant symbolic event for Americans, both Indians and non-Indians, in regard to their cultures, values, and ways of life.

The NPS relationship with Native Americans regarding the site has historically fluctuated depending on current conditions and the national mood. The monument is encompassed by the Crow Indian Reservation and the Reservation has indicated they do not want the boundary of the Park to expand. Local American Indians strongly object to the fact that the NPS locks the Park gates at night and put a fence around a site that has such significance to them.

Just outside the entrance gate is the Crow Agency, which contains the Bureau of Indian Affairs Crow Headquarters, two grocery stores, a café, a bank, a gas station, and a casino. Although these activities exist, the infrastructure necessary for capturing visitors to the Crow Agency is not in place. The NPS is working with the Crow Reservation to improve relations by considering joint acquisition of a new visitor center and Crow cultural center at Garryowen. Park staff members view this potential acquisition as a positive step that would bring economic benefit to the Crow Agency, along with the concession contract with the Little Bighorn College for the tour bus operation.

■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

4.1 Unit Plans

The Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument General Management Plan (GMP) was completed in August 1986 and updated in May of 1995. The main issue of the GMP is the relocation of the visitor center to Garryowen. This relocation would provide visitors a complete comprehensive view of the battlefield from the first skirmish line to Last Stand Hill. The plan also calls for alternative transportation to take visitors from the visitor center on a chronological tour of the Park.

The Traffic Safety Study prepared in 1998 identifies several transportation alternatives for the Park. The study considered facility improvements and policies and was consistent with the GMP. Options considered included expansion of the existing parking areas, widening of the tour road, stronger vehicle restrictions on the tour road, a system to take reservations, and development of remote parking areas with a transit system. The study recommends both short- and long-term improvements. Some short-term recommendations included signage and pavement marking improvements, wayside parking improvements, and establishing a uniform 25 MPH speed limit for the tour road. One long-term recommendation was the creation of a remote parking area on the corner of MT 342 and U.S. Highway 212, which would include consideration for a concession contract for a shuttle system that would operate a fleet of buses to transport people between the remote parking and the visitor center and along the tour road.

The 1999 Resources Management Plan recognizes the same concerns, and is consistent in its conclusions, with the Traffic Safety Study and GMP regarding parking and the tour road. The plan states that several alternatives have been considered, including a remote parking lot located below the monument and the use of transit service within the Park proper. The plan also recognizes the GMP proposal to relocate the visitor center to Garryowen and to institute an ATS.

4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

The NPS continues to work with adjacent property owners, the Crow Agency and the Crow Indian Reservation to assess and evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the unit plans' recommendations. Specifically, the new recommended facilities are the relocation of the visitor center to Garryowen, the creation of a remote parking area below the existing Park entrance, and the possibility of an ATS such as a shuttle and tour bus system.

■ 5.0 Assessment of Need and System Options

5.1 Magnitude of Need

The need for alternative transportation at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument is well documented. The following factors form the basis for the need for ATS.

- The Park has high levels of summer visitation and peak periods of impact during the anniversary of the battle, Sturgis Bike Rally Week, and Crow Fair.
- The Park has a single ingress and egress route from the entrance gate to the visitor center and battlefields.

The Narrow Tour Road Has No Shoulders or Markings



- The tour road is very narrow at 18 feet with no shoulders, no pavement markings, and in some locations significant drop-offs of six or more inches.
- The parking areas at both the visitor center and battlefields are at or above capacity during the peak summer months.
- The NPS, as described in the Resources Management Plan, is reluctant to further impact resources by widening the tour road or expanding the parking areas.

5.2 Range of Feasible Transit Alternatives

Several alternatives for short-term traffic management improvements were identified in the 1998 Traffic Safety Study and summarized above. These improvements have been proposed, and in some cases implemented, to enhance safety by reducing driver confusion.

- Expand wayside areas on the tour road to accommodate two cars at one time.
- Install white pavement markings in parking areas to indicate the desired traffic flow pattern.
- Install pedestrian crossing signs and pavement strips across the tour road near the Seventh Calvary Monument.
- Adjust regulatory and warning signage to a standard mounting height.

- Install guardrails on both sides of the tour road where there are steep drop-offs, such as Deep Coulee.
- Post the tour road with a consistent 25 MPH speed limit instead of the current 25, 30, and 35 MPH postings.

Projected growth in visitation will require additional long-term solutions. The range of alternative transportation improvements considered is summarized below. Several of the alternatives considered would only be required during peak summer months.

- **Vehicle Length Restricted Access** – One alternative, considered a modification to the existing tour road eight-ton weight restriction, is to restrict access to the tour road to vehicles over a certain length during the summer season. If this system were implemented, a maximum total length per vehicle unit (vehicle or vehicle plus trailer) would be established (typically 22 feet at other NPS parks). The result would be that any vehicle exceeding the maximum unit length would not be allowed access to the tour road. This would require visitors in all oversized vehicles to use the guided tour currently provided by the Little Bighorn College. Year 2020 projections indicate ridership demand would increase to 309 one-way rides per hour. This would exceed the capacity of the current system and require some additional form of Park-provided transportation and improvements to the oversized vehicle parking area.
- **Visitor Reservation System** – A visitor reservation system, which would only be required during peak summer months, would require that visitors call ahead to obtain an access permit to enter the Park. Park visitors may not like the reservation system because it requires advance planning and scheduling and it would not allow visitors passing through the area to visit the Park without calling ahead. Such a system may also have a negative impact on the economy of the adjacent communities by limiting the number of visitors to the area.
- Another transit system would be necessary to provide visitor access to the battlefields via the tour road. A possible location for a remote parking area has been identified at the junction of MT 342 and U.S. 212. The site is about one-half of a mile from the Park entrance and is owned by the Custer Battlefield Preservation Committee, a non-profit organization.
- The proposed site at Garryowen is the location of the first skirmish line in the Battle of Little Bighorn. This relocation of the visitor center jointly with a Crow cultural center would provide visitors with a chronological experience of the battle.
- Additional road improvements would be required to provide access to the Reno-Benteen Battlefield from the proposed location of the visitor center by connecting into the existing tour road.

6.0 Persons Interviewed

Neil Mangum, Superintendent, NPS

John Doerner, NPS

Michael Stops, Chief Ranger, NPS

Kitty Belle Deeruoze, NPS

Ken Woody, Chief of Interpretation, NPS

Clifford Arbogast, Jr., Facility Manager, NPS

Carla Colstad, Harding, Montana

Jacob Eckman, Harding, Montana

Laurie Tschittie, Harding, Montana